

MÓNika SZENTE-VARGA

## Diplomatic Relations between Hungary and Central American Countries after World War II

This paper examines the contacts, mainly diplomatic ones, which were established between Central American states and Hungary in the period between 1945 and 1995. The general context used for this study is that of Hungarian–Latin American relations, and the point of view is essentially Hungarian. The analysis is based on documents compiled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which are currently located in the Hungarian National Archive.

In order to underline the dominant trends in the system of relations mentioned above, the period of study of 50 years will be subdivided into five different stages as follows, notwithstanding the simplifications this may imply:

- 1) 1945–1948: characterised by a reduced possibility of action for Hungary and some fruitless attempts of opening towards Latin America;
- 2) 1948–1959: the integration of Hungary into the Soviet Bloc and its adjustment to the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, which claimed to be internationalist, but which in fact showed little interest in the Latin American subcontinent;
- 3) 1960–1979: increasing attention on Latin America due to the events in Cuba;
- 4) 1980–1989: specific interest in Central America because of the armed conflicts, in particular due to the Sandinista government in Nicaragua;
- 5) 1990–1995: the ‘European introversion’ of Hungary.

The hypothesis is that Hungary pursued both economic and political goals in Latin America, but as the former did not materialise, Hungarian foreign policy depended to a great extent on political considerations. When these latter conditions disappeared in 1990 with the change of regime, the interest in Central America and in the subcontinent more generally vanished.

### *The Period between 1945 and 1948*

The countries of Latin America and Hungary were situated on opposing sides during World War II, and consequently bilateral relations were broken. By the time the armed conflict ended, Hungary was in a precarious situation: approximately 40% of its national assets had been destroyed and around 6% of the population had perished.<sup>1</sup> In 1945 the country was liberated, and at the same time occupied by the

<sup>1</sup> The source of the data used in this paragraph: ROMSICS, Ignác: *Magyarország története a XX. században* [History of Hungary in the 20th century], Budapest, 1999, 267–268, 304.

Red Army. The country lost its sovereignty and the most important decisions were taken by the Allied Control Commission – headed by the Soviet Union – until the signing of the peace treaty in 1947 and its subsequent ratification in Hungary. It was then, with the disappearance of the Commission, that Hungary became independent again in theory, but the presence of Soviet soldiers, stationed in the country on a permanent basis until 1991, made it difficult, if not impossible, for Hungary to regain its sovereignty and real freedom.

Taking into account these antecedents, no Hungarian interest in Latin America could be expected. Curiously enough, there was some. On 3 February 1946, the Hungarian Association of Latin America was founded in Budapest in the ceremonial hall of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, with the presence and active participation of some high government officials. Dr. István Ries, then Minister of Justice, was elected president of the Association, and János Gyöngyössi, Minister of Foreign Relations, became honorary president. The declared goal of the organization centred on the promotion of cultural, commercial and economic ties with Latin America and hence it lobbied for the normalisation of diplomatic relations.<sup>2</sup> To this end, it was necessary to obtain the approval of the Allied Control Commission, which gave the green light only in the case of Chile; but as the answer took several months, not even Chilean-Hungarian relations could be normalised.

Now, with half a century of hindsight, it is evident that the Hungarian attempt to open up towards the Latin American subcontinent was condemned to failure. However, in this case, it is more interesting to analyse the following: why did certain Hungarian politicians think of Latin America when feeling the necessity to open up? The reasons could include the lack of economic possibilities in a Europe shaken by the war, in which, to make things worse, Hungary fought on the losing side; the abundance of raw materials in Latin America; the vision of the subcontinent as a potential market for Hungarian exports; the presence of Hungarian emigrants in Latin America;<sup>3</sup> as well as the notion that Hungary had always taken greater interest in Latin America than vice versa, therefore it was Hungary that had to take the initiative in mending ties if it wanted them to be normalised.

### *The Period between 1948 and 1959*

The Communist Party took power in Hungary at the end of the 1940s. The subsequent decade meant sovietisation: on the one hand, the construction and/or the copying of the Soviet model; on the other, the adaptation to the interests and goals

<sup>2</sup> Magyar Országos Levéltár [Hungarian National Archive, hereafter abbreviated] XIX-J-I-k, Latin America 1945-64. 20/a, Administrative documents, 1946.

<sup>3</sup> Approximately 200,000 people. The most numerous groups could be found in Brazil (about 100,000 Hungarians) and Argentina (over 50,000). Other groups of several thousands were in Venezuela, Chile, Uruguay, Mexico and Cuba. Source: ANDERLE, Ádám: *La mirada húngara. Estudios históricos sobre España y América Latina*, Szeged, SZTE, 2010, 172.

of the Soviet Union. Under these circumstances, the highest aspiration of Hungarian foreign policy in Latin America could be nothing more than the normalisation of relations with the 'big three' (Argentina, Brazil and Mexico) and with Chile, as well as opening representations in these countries, with the possibility of covering other Latin American countries from these embassies, via concurrent accreditations.

Only one of the above-mentioned goals materialised: the resumption of Argentinian-Hungarian diplomatic ties, which took place in 1949. Possibly, the position of Argentina in the war helped the normalisation of bilateral relations. The South American country had broken diplomatic contacts with the Axis as late as 1944, and only entered the war formally in March 1945, when the armed conflict was nearing its end.<sup>4</sup>

The diplomatic relations of Hungary were widened in the 1950s but without necessarily implying the creation of offices *in situ*, and included Bolivia (1952)<sup>5</sup> and later Uruguay (1956).<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning that in spite of the revolutionary changes in Guatemala, on-going since 1944, no activity of rapprochement can be observed on behalf of the Hungarian foreign policy towards Central America, as the Isthmus was considered to be in the sphere of influence of the United States.<sup>7</sup> For the Hungarian leadership in the fifties, Latin America meant a few South American countries.

With the repression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the subsequent international reaction, the goal of normalising Hungarian-Latin American relations and their possible diversification in the future became complicated. For several years, Latin American countries took a common stand with respect to the Hungarian case before the United Nations.

After overthrowing the dictatorship of Batista, the new Cuban leadership established diplomatic ties with the Socialist countries, but left Hungary last on purpose, indicating the events of 1956 as the reason for their decision.<sup>8</sup> Cuban-Hungarian

<sup>4</sup> WITTMAN, Tibor: *Latin-Amerika története* [History of Latin America], Budapest, Gondolat, 1978, 390.

<sup>5</sup> The ties with Bolivia were a result of the division of labour within the Eastern block, the aim of which was to have a Socialist presence in South America at a low cost. One Socialist country was in charge of representing the others. Hungary was given this task in Bolivia. The establishment of contacts coincided with the Bolivian Revolution of 1952.

<sup>6</sup> Later the date was modified, upon the petition of the Uruguayan government, to 1870, the year when diplomatic ties had been established between Uruguay and the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. The reason for the change was that 1956 would coincide with Hungarian Revolution and Struggle for Independence and its bloody repression.

<sup>7</sup> This is reflected for example by the fact that diplomatic contacts between Central American countries and Hungary were established rather late, basically from the 1970s.

<sup>8</sup> The position of the Mexican government was apparently even harsher. Twelve years after the Revolution, the Hungarian chargé d'affaires in La Paz summed up his conversation with a Mexican diplomat as follows: 'With respect to the points that Mexico has not broken its relations with Cuba or with the Spanish Republican government, the diplomat said that they have a theoretical premise in this question. While Franco continues to be head of the Spanish government, Mexico will not establish diplomatic contacts with Spain. The same applies to Hungary, that is, while János Kádár

contacts were finally established on 18 December 1960, during the visit of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara to Hungary.

### *The Period between 1960 and 1979*

The Cuban Revolution attracted attention not only to the island itself, but to the subcontinent more generally.

Until now the Socialist countries, including our motherland, have put more emphasis on the evolution of relations with African and Asian countries. The only thing that should be changed in this respect is that, after examining the opportunities seriously, we need to devote greater attention to Latin America.<sup>9</sup>

Parallel to these considerations, formal contacts grew in number: Brazil (1961, elevated to ambassadorial level in 1973), Chile (1965), Colombia (consulate general since 1968, and full diplomatic contacts since 1972), Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela (all three in 1969). Naturally, this advance would have been impossible without the interest and cooperation of the counterparts.<sup>10</sup> Alejandro Carrillo, a Mexican senator, described the behaviour of Mexico as follows, a case that we may use in a generalised sense to characterise the subcontinent: 'Although Mexico will never admit it openly, the question of the Hungarian-Mexican diplomatic ties depends principally on the relations between Hungary and the United States.'<sup>11</sup> These latter improved considerably in the sixties and bilateral US-Hungarian diplomatic relations were established at ambassadorial level in 1965, which gave the green light for Latin American countries.

In 1967, the Hungarian Institute for the Investigation of Development and Markets published a study titled 'Latin America.'<sup>12</sup> It was considered a confiden-

heads the country, Mexico will not establish diplomatic relations with Hungary, on the basis of the principle of *no-intervention*. János Kádár asked for foreign help, the help of the Soviet troops.' The new Hungarian government set up with the help of the Soviet military intervention had little attraction in Mexico, but the negativity of this vision started to erode with the passing of years. Source of the quote: MOL XIX-J-I-j, México, 1968, box 64. 102-1, 00540/6-ig, Mexikói diplomaták véleménye a magyar-mexikói diplomáciai kapcsolatokról [Opinions of Mexican diplomats on Hungarian-Mexican relations]. 1968.

<sup>9</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j, Latin America 1945-64, box 2. 11/i, Magyar-latin-amerikai kapcsolatok [Hungarian-Latin American relations]. 1960-64.

<sup>10</sup> This attention was reduced temporarily due to the military intervention against Czechoslovakia in 1968, in which Hungary participated; thus Hungarian negotiations with Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela were prolonged.

<sup>11</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j México, 1968, box 64. 102-1, 001322, Magyar-mexikói diplomáciai kapcsolatok [Hungarian-Mexican relations]. 1967.

<sup>12</sup> HUSZÁGH, Nándorné – KÁDÁR, Béla: *Latin-Amerika* [Latin America], Konjunktúra- és Piackutató Intézet, Budapest, 1967.

tial document at the time, for ‘internal use’ only. The analysis embraces the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. It can be observed that Mexico (North America), is mentioned together with the majority of South American countries, but no Central American state is included.

By the end of the sixties, contacts between Hungary and most of the South American states had been normalised, which created an example, and up to a certain extent an incentive for the rest of the Latin American countries. The first diplomatic link between Hungary and a Central American state dates from 1970. The protagonist is Costa Rica, the most stable and developed country in the region. According to a Hungarian summary made in 1979, “the position of Costa Rica on major international issues such as peace, disarmament and colonialism is quite close to that of the Socialist countries.”<sup>13</sup> What is more, Costa Rica showed interest in the non-aligned movement and started to develop relations with the Socialist world from the seventies. The Costa Rican minister of foreign relations visited Hungary in 1971 as well as in 1974. During his first visit, made immediately after the establishment of diplomatic relations (1970), a commercial agreement was signed by the two countries. The exchange was modest, states the 1979 report, but it showed a growing inclination, mainly due to the sale of Hungarian buses to Costa Rica.

The next country with which Hungary established diplomatic relations was Honduras. The reasons were primarily commercial. It is important to observe that even in the eighties, when the Hungarian leadership decided to interrupt temporarily bilateral diplomatic ties due to the ‘role that Honduras played in the policies of the United States against Nicaragua,’<sup>14</sup> bilateral commercial relations went on as usual and Hungary did not stop buying Honduran coffee. Thus it seems that in the eighties, economic interests could weigh more than political ones.

Going back to the seventies, the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Hungary and Mexico in 1974 generated a wave of interest on behalf of other Latin American countries. Already in the same decade, diplomatic ties at ambassadorial level were created with Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Jamaica, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago. Naturally, Hungarian foreign policy did not wish to open offices *in situ*, but planned to cover the new places from already existing representations. The islands, with the exception of Jamaica, were covered from Venezuela, whereas the Embassy of Hungary in Mexico was in charge of Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama and Jamaica.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j Costa Rica, 1979, box 42. 27.1-2.

<sup>14</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j Latin America, 1987, box 140. 205-10, 00846 A magyar-latin-amerikai kapcsolatok alakulása 1986-ban és a teendők 1987-ben [The development of Hungarian-Latin American relations in 1986 and tasks to be done in 1987].

<sup>15</sup> This situation was similar to the one between the two world wars, when one representation which might be described as a base was in charge of the Latin American countries. In those days the Hungarian Embassy in Washington covered Mexico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Puerto Rico and El Salvador.

To sum it up, the Cuban Revolution opened the eyes of the Socialist World to Latin America. The first centres of investigation specialised in the subcontinent were created, and works of Latin American literature in general started to be published in the Eastern bloc. Hungarian-Latin American diplomatic relations multiplied between 1960 and 1979 as a result of the increasing attention paid to these countries by the Socialist bloc, of which Hungary was a member. This was due to the improvement of the relations between Hungary and the United States from the middle of the sixties, and because of the foreign policies of the Latin American countries themselves, managed in mobile coordinates, that were tightened or widened by the Cold War.

### *The Period between 1980 and 1989*

If the Cuban Revolution boosted the Socialist interest in Latin America on the basis of political considerations, which the Hungarian leadership tried to combine with economic interests, the Nicaraguan Revolution focused that attention on Central America. Here, however, there were no major Hungarian commercial aspirations, possibly due to the belief that the countries of the Isthmus were too small to serve as export markets.

The joy of the Hungarian leadership at the Sandinista victory was not complete. As a Hungarian diplomat put it, 'successful revolutions in Latin America (Cuba, Nicaragua) won against Anti-Communist and Rightist dictatorships in armed fights, but without the participation of the Muscovite Communist Parties.'<sup>16</sup> Therefore, there was a certain lack of confidence as to the real bases of the above-mentioned regimes, whether they were really Socialist or not. The experience in Cuba, the only Socialist state in Latin America until the Sandinista Revolution, was not completely satisfactory to the Socialist bloc. There was criticism in hard-line Socialist countries such as East Germany and Czechoslovakia over the lack of Cuban economic effort, and there appeared the opinion that the lack of successes on the island projected a bad image not only of Cuba but of Socialism in general. Consequently, until the Cuban leadership managed to solve these problems, those Socialist countries that helped the most wanted to have a say in Cuban affairs in order to help with their experience, and also to make sure that the aid they were sending was well and adequately used. Naturally, the Cubans had a markedly different point of view in this question with respect to the quantity of international aid and its usage as well as the general possibilities. Of course, they were opposed to the idea of foreign countries having any control over Cuban internal affairs and also to the pressure exercised by some Socialist countries in this sense.<sup>17</sup> Hungary was not considered to form part

<sup>16</sup> DÖMÉNY, JÁNOS: *Magyar diplomata Latin-Amerikában* [A Hungarian Diplomat in Latin America], Szeged, SZTE, 2009, 43.

<sup>17</sup> For more details, see: BORTLOVÁ, Hana: *Československo a Kuba 1959–1962* [Czechoslovakia and Cuba,

of these countries and the development of Cuban-Hungarian relations could be characterised as harmonious.

What worried the Hungarian government most with respect to Nicaragua was not so much the question of its Socialist background – although naturally the ideological affiliation of the Nicaraguan leaders had a central role in the first reports – but the potential economic consequences of the Nicaraguan revolution on Hungary. Whereas there was marked and enthusiastic support for the new Nicaraguan government in the media, the political leadership was more sceptical, foreseeing and fearing the costs. The worry that a new revolution in Latin America would be very expensive for the Socialist countries started to become a reality as early as 1979 when, even before establishing bilateral diplomatic ties, a delegation of the *Frente Sandinista* visited Hungary and asked for support. The Hungarian government consented<sup>18</sup> with the following reasoning:

The government aid is justified primarily by political reasons: the progressive tendencies of the new [Nicaraguan] government and its consequent expectations and willingness of cooperation with Socialist countries, as well as the aid offered by the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries.<sup>19</sup>

During the Cold War, when travelling from one bloc to the other, antagonistic bloc was not a common practice, the image projected by the state was a key. The image of the Socialist countries in Latin America in general was more positive and powerful than in reality. This caused tensions not only in the relations with Cuba, but also, later, between Nicaragua and the Socialist world, because both revolutionary governments expected more support from their Socialist friends. As Ernesto 'Che' Guevara said in his famous speech in Algeria: socialist countries must help pay those who are setting off on the path of liberation.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the Socialist countries should finance the development of the Third World. This shows that Guevara was convinced that the Socialist world would be able to carry out this task. The reality, however, was different. Yet, to confess that these convictions were overestimated could have undermined the internal security of these countries as well as ruining the prestige and attraction of Socialism.

.....  
1959–1962], Prague, Charles University, 2011; BORTLOVÁ, Hana: „Hospodářské vztahy Kuby a Československa v 60. až 80. letech” [Economic Relations between Cuba and Czechoslovakia from the sixties until the eighties], *Výstup vědeckého projektu* RM 03/01/09, Prague, 2009; SZENTE-VARGA, Mónika: *Relaciones políticas entre Cuba y Checoslovaquia en los años sesenta*. CD del XIV Congreso Internacional de AHILA, Castellón, España, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> The Council of Ministers decided to send a mobile hospital with 400 beds. The cost amounted to around 20 million forints.

<sup>19</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j, Nicaragua, 1979, box 102. III, 004467/10 Javaslat a Minisztertanácsnak [Proposal to the Council of Ministers].

<sup>20</sup> Speech by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara in Algeria, 1965, <http://cubaadiario.blogspot.com/2011/01/discurso-de-ernesto-che-guevara-en.html> [01/07/2011].



During the years after 1979, Hungary provided help to the Sandinistas, the value of which reached 148 million forints by 1984. What seemed a lot to Hungary was not considered sufficient by a Nicaragua in the middle of an armed conflict. In order to convince the Socialist countries of the need for more aid – which, from the Nicaraguan point of view, the Socialist bloc would have no trouble in providing – the Sandinista leadership made various visits to Eastern Europe and to the Soviet Union (of which we may underline those of President Daniel Ortega himself, in 1985, and Tomás Borge, Minister of Interior, in 1987).

According to the Nicaraguan leader, sustaining the economic bases of the Sandinista system can only be achieved with exterior sources. The fundamental origin of these sources are the Socialist countries. Hence they ask that their request should be judged on the basis of political considerations.<sup>21</sup>

The Hungarian ambassador in Managua, János Kiss, wrote:

The actual situation of the Sandinista system is extremely adverse. [...] The destiny of the Nicaraguan Revolution can be influenced to a great extent by the international conditions, among them the evolution of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. The political and economic support of the Socialist countries plays a principal role, on which not only the survival of the revolution, but also its future development and possible deviation depend.<sup>22</sup>

The fourth reunion of the mixed commission formed by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and Nicaragua was held in 1987. The Nicaraguan leadership ranked the Socialist countries according to the support they had given, and put them into two groups: whether they helped a lot or simply helped. Hungary was assigned to the second group, among those countries that helped, but not much, and to make things worse, was always mentioned last. The Hungarian participants at the meeting complained to their ministry of foreign affairs in a coded telegram: 'Nicaraguan leaders have formed a false image of Hungary and therefore cannot appreciate properly our help.'<sup>23</sup> Confessing that their country was overestimated, or at least revealing some of the Hungarian economic realities can be considered a desperate and final step, which the Hungarian leadership did carry out at the end of the eighties.

<sup>21</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j, Nicaragua, 1985, box 113. III, 002223/19 Jelentés Daniel Ortega magyarországi látogatásáról [Report on the visit of Daniel Ortega to Hungary].

<sup>22</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j, Nicaragua, 1985, box 113. III, 004025 Éves beszámoló [Annual Report].

<sup>23</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j, Nicaragua, 1987, box 102. III-503.1, 005089/1 Magyar vonatkozások a KGST-Nicaragua Vegyesbizottság 4. ülészakán [Hungarian issues in the 4th reunion of the mixed commission constituted by COMECON and Nicaragua].



The Hungarian definition of Latin America started to expand in the eighties, including new areas, more precisely Central America and the Caribbean. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hungary put together a document in 1987 on the development of Hungarian-Latin American relations.<sup>24</sup> In contrast with previous studies, which had a smaller scope, and in which Central America was not even mentioned, this work included more states, several of them from the Isthmus. A total of 21 countries appear: Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Suriname, Guyana, *Costa Rica*,<sup>25</sup> *Honduras*, the Dominican Republic, *Guatemala*, Haiti, *Nicaragua*, *Panama*, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados.<sup>26</sup>

In the documentation of the Hungarian National Archive, information can be found in the category *Central America* – a non-existent grouping before the eighties – with respect to the period 1981–1989. This is a telling sign of an expanding documentation, based naturally on an increase in interest in the region. The latter is also reflected by the great number of books published on Central America<sup>27</sup> and

<sup>24</sup> MOLXIX-J-1-j, Latin America 1987, box 140. 205-10, 00846 A magyar-latin-amerikai kapcsolatok alakulása 1986-ban és a teendők 1987-ben [The evolution of Hungarian-Latin American relations in 1986 and tasks for 1987], Budapest, 06/02/1987, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hungary, prepared in six copies.

<sup>25</sup> Central American countries are in italics in the list.

<sup>26</sup> Chile is not present in the analysis because Hungarian-Chilean diplomatic ties were broken after the coup d'état in 1973.

<sup>27</sup> As a result of the growing interest of Hungary in the region, various books related to Central America were published. Some were written by Hungarian authors, whereas others were translations of foreign works. They mostly focused on Nicaragua, but there are also writings about El Salvador, Panama, and general works. The topics include history, geography, literature and travel. Some works written by Hungarians are listed below:

- ANDERLE, Ádám (ed.): *Sandinisták* [Sandinistas], 1985;

- ANDERLE, Ádám: *Távol Istentől ... közel az Egyesült Államokhoz* [So far from God ... and so close to the United States], 1985;

- ÁRKUS, István: *Reng a föld Nicaraguában* [Earthquake in Nicaragua], 1979;

- BALÁZS, Dénes: *Vándorúton Panamától Mexikóig* [Travelling from Panama to Mexico], 1981;

- BOGLÁR, Lajos: *Indián művészet Mexikótól Peruig* [Indigenous art from Mexico to Peru], 1983;

- BOGLÁR, Lajos (ed.): *A tollaskígyó fiai. Dél- és közép-amerikai népek meséi* [The sons of the feathered serpent. South and Central American tales], 1966 and 1984;

- CZIRÁKI, Péter: *Két Amerika között* [Between two Americas], 1983;

- DORNACH, Mária – T. ASZÓDI, Éva: *A tollaskígyó búcsúja. Közép- és délamerikai indián mesék és legendák* [The farewell of the feathered serpent. Tales and legends of South and Central American Indians], 1989;

- KIRÁLY, János: *A közép-amerikai válságövezet* [The Central American crisis area], 1984;

- ORTUTAY LOVAS, Gyula: *A tűzhányók gerillái* [Guerillas of the volcanoes], 1983;

- SERES, Attila: *A kontrák ellen* [Against the Contras], 1987;

- SIMON, János: *Nicaragua – Agricultural World-rounding. Agricultural Encyclopaedia of the countries of the World*, 1988;

- SIMOR, András (comp.): *Sandino fiai. Válogatás századunk nicaraguai irodalmából* [The sons of Sandino. Anthology of Nicaraguan literature of our century], 1985;

- SÓLYOM, Antal: *Nicaragua*, 1986.

Works translated into Hungarian include:

- AGEE, Philip: *A cégen belül: CIA napló* [Inside the Company: CIA Diary], 1985;

by studies that appeared in specialised journals, such as Foreign Policy (*Külpolitika*) and Social Review (*Társadalmi Szemle*). Among the authors we can highlight Ádám Anderle (historian), István Árkus (journalist), Sándor Gyenge, János Király<sup>28</sup> and János Simon<sup>29</sup> (politologists), and Antal Sólyom (diplomat).

This interest, so noticeable in the eighties, however, evaporated by 1990. In order to understand better the reasons behind the decline in Hungarian interest in Latin America and, in particular, in Central America, we will analyse another, more specific document from 1987, entitled 'Questions that need special attention with respect to Latin America in the years to come.' The work can be divided into two parts: the first contains general ideas, while the second focuses on specific points of the bilateral relations between Hungary and some Latin American countries. The general ideas were organized in 15 points, five of which will be outlined here:

1. Developing high-level political contacts in our bilateral relations and using them for our economic purposes. One general task is enhancing Hungarian exports to Latin America.

7. Foci of conflict on the continent.

13. Strategy and political practice of the United States towards Latin America. Methods and tools of US diplomacy in Latin America.

14. The Soviet Union and Latin America – centres of gravity of the Soviet policies, the development of the economic and political cooperation, etc.

15. The situation of Nicaragua and Cuban policies towards Latin America.<sup>30</sup>

The first point, which was obviously the most important one for Hungarian foreign policy, was the economic and financial question. Political contacts were desired in order to develop economic links. According to the economist Béla Kádár, 'the foreign policy interests of small nations are by nature principally of an economic character.'<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, commercial exchange with Central America had always

.....  
- DIDION, Joan: *Salvador*, 1985;

- McCULLOUGH, David: *Óceántól óceánig: a Panama-csatorna építésének története* [The Path between the Seas: the Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870–1914], 1986.

<sup>28</sup> His doctoral thesis, presented in 1984, was entitled *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok Latin-Amerika politikája a kubai forradalom győzelme után (1959–1984)* [The Latin American policies of the United States after the victory of the Cuban Revolution (1959–1984)].

<sup>29</sup> He also wrote his doctoral thesis on Latin America, more specifically on the Isthmus: *A diktatúrák bukása Közép-Amerikában* [The fall of the dictatorships in Central America], doctoral thesis, Szeged, 1982.

<sup>30</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j, Latin America, 1987, box 140. 205-10, 00846/1 A latin-amerikai viszonylatban a következő években különös figyelmet igénylő kérdések [Questions that need special attention with respect to Latin America in the years to come].

<sup>31</sup> KÁDÁR, Béla: "A latin-amerikai országokkal folytatott együttműködésünk irányzatai, stratégiai összetevői, keretei és formái" [Directions, strategic components, frameworks and forms of our cooperation with the Latin American countries], *Külpolitika*, XV, 1988/5, 110.

been minimal.<sup>32</sup> The regional conflicts mentioned in point No. 7 (Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala), were on the cusp of disappearing by the 1990s, and with them the reason for particular interest in the Isthmus also vanished. As can be seen from points No. 14 and 15, the Cold War implied political considerations (for example primary ties with Cuba and Nicaragua) and the necessity of adopting the directives of the Soviet Union. ‘The Soviet diplomats have emphasised during the discussions that the situation in Nicaragua and potential developments should only be judged taking into rigorous account the international global political correlations.’<sup>33</sup> However, what proved to be valid in 1979 was no longer so ten years later, after the coordinates of the Cold War had been erased. Hungarian foreign policy regained its freedom of movement and together with it the freedom to turn its back on external pressures and ‘forget’ about Latin America.

### *The Period between 1990 and 1995*

The end of the Cold War meant that Central America and the Latin American subcontinent in general ceased to be a ground for ideological conflicts.

The strategic ideas of the United States with respect to Latin America have always taken as their point of departure the communist danger, and using this argument, forced the Latin American countries to take certain servile measures. This way, coups d’état were self-justified. Now this danger is about to disappear, therefore the countries of Latin America will have more chance to act independently. [...] Latin America is no longer a priority for the United States of America.<sup>34</sup>

Not only did the United States pay less attention to Latin America, other countries acted in a similar manner, too. At the beginning of the 1990s, the political and

<sup>32</sup> It is a paradox that the main goals were always of economic character, whereas the period in question is characterised by a lack of success in this field. Among the reasons for the modest commercial interchange we can find the syndrome of the Cold War (firms from Socialist countries and their advances were often viewed as suspicious and filled with political content). This, however, was not the only factor. The lack of information about the Latin American conditions, and in particular about the Central American ones, the missing institutional support (few embassies or other representations) as well as the lack of experience of Hungarian companies in competing in a market economy have to be mentioned as well.

<sup>33</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j, Nicaragua, 1979, box 102. III, 00984/12 A nicaraguai helyzet néhány aktuális kérdése Some actual questions of the Nicaraguan situation , written by the chargé d’affaires *ad interim* of Hungary, Antal Sólyom, from Mexico City.

<sup>34</sup> MOL XIX-J-I-j, Latin America, 1989, box 94. A kelet-európai országok latin-amerikai értékelése [The Latin American evaluation of the East European countries], written by the Hungarian ambassador in Brazil, Gábor Sütő, 26/11/1989.

economic changes in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the wars in the Balkans stole the limelight. Latin America also paid attention to the European events. Local democratic forces saw the changes in Eastern Europe as a potential example to follow, whereas there existed a certain feeling of worry that the subcontinent would lose its importance on the international scene and therefore some part of the external aid it had been receiving.

Hungary as well as the neighbouring countries concentrated on their own transformations, as all of them had the intention of replacing a one-party system with a multi-party one by real elections and converting a state economy into an economy where the rules of the market would prevail. The population was very optimistic about the future, yet the short-term outcome was a severe economic crisis.

In 1990–91, when economic perspectives were not yet so bleak, the Hungarian leadership made an attempt to eliminate the last gaps that existed in the Hungarian-Latin American relations, establishing, for example, ties with Guatemala and El Salvador, recognising the governments in power. This, however, did not mean the amplification of the network of Hungarian representations. In fact, what happened was exactly the opposite. The only Hungarian embassy in the region, recently moved from Nicaragua to Costa Rica in 1991, was closed permanently, leaving Hungary without representation on the Isthmus of Central America.

### *Conclusions and perspectives*

Diplomatic relations between Hungary and Central America were formed, generally, in the 1970s as part of the Hungarian goal of having a bigger presence in Latin America but without implying a special interest in the Isthmus. Central America appeared suddenly on the horizon of Hungarian foreign policy with the taking of power by the Sandinistas, and disappeared equally fast ten years later. The eighties were characterised by intense attention, the focus of which was Nicaragua. The principal motivation of Hungary was external and politico-ideological (the example of and pressure exercised by the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries). This motivation could not be diversified towards commercial and cultural ties, partly because of the lack of time and also due to the great geographical distance and the lack of mutual understanding on bilateral commerce.<sup>35</sup> Hungary, even be-

<sup>35</sup> With respect to the Hungarian-Central American cultural ties, there was some development. For example, various works by Miguel Ángel Asturias were translated to Hungarian, and a good number of publications of considerable quality about the region appeared in the eighties [see footnote 27]. However, it seems that the few historic meeting points that had existed between Hungary and this region, such as the arrival of ex-participants of the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848–49, and later of small groups of emigrants, were not sufficiently exploited. Another shared historical experience was the appearance of Central American safe-conducts in Hungary during the Second World War, related to Colonel José Arturo Castellanos, consul general of El Salvador in Switzerland; to György Mandl-Mantello, textile manufacturer born in Transylvania and first secretary of the

ing a Socialist country, wanted to have exchanges on a Capitalist base, whereas the Nicaraguan leadership wished to found its economic ties on Socialist principles such as solidarity, mutual aid, internationalism, and so on. Consequently, the commercial relations did not bring the results Hungary had hoped for, since they tended to imply costs instead of financial gains.

Upon regaining sovereignty, Hungary turned towards Europe, achieving its European Union membership in 2004. This membership, however, also means that Hungary forms part of the network of relations of the EU, including the strategic relationship with Latin America, announced in 1999. Therefore, Hungarian foreign policy should not forget about the subcontinent.

Central America is of peripheral importance for the EU. On the other hand, from a Central American point of view, the European Union is much more important (benefactor, source of investments and commercial partner). In 2012 the EU ranked fourth – after the United States, Mexico and China – in terms of Central American imports and was second, after the US, in the case of exports.<sup>36</sup> Altogether, the European Union had an 11.3% share in Central American trade.<sup>37</sup> The first place belonged to the United States in all registers with a difference that might be called overwhelming. Besides traditional partners like the US and Mexico, we can find a ‘new’ competitor in the arena: China.<sup>38</sup>

The attention paid by Beijing to Latin America has grown noticeably since the end of the Cold War. China has a special political and diplomatic objective in Central America, as some of the last countries in the world that officially recognise Taiwan are situated in the Isthmus. The rapprochement of China and Central America could translate into an extra pressure on the European Union to play a more active part on the Isthmus as a preventive step to counter the growing Chinese influence.

.....  
Consulate General of El Salvador in Geneva, and also to Desider Ehrenfeld, a citizen residing in Budapest, who claimed to be consul of Costa Rica and dispatched documents of his supposed country. When the political bases disappeared around 1990, the Hungarian-Central American commercial and cultural ties were also neglected for being weaker and because, to a certain point, they depended on political relations.

<sup>36</sup> European Commission: European Union, Trade in goods with Central America, [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2005/april/tradoc\\_121997.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2005/april/tradoc_121997.pdf) [10.08.2015].

<sup>37</sup> European Commission: Countries and regions: Central America, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/central-america/> [10.08.2015].

<sup>38</sup> For more details on the ties between the Latin American subcontinent and China: LEHOCZKI, Bernadett: *Latin-Amerika és Kína: a kapcsolatok új rendszere?* [Latin America and China: a new network of relations?], Szegedi Tudományegyetem – Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem: Szeged – Budapest, 2009. Doctoral thesis edited by the University of Szeged and the Corvinus University of Budapest.

*Abstract*

*Within the framework of Hungarian-Latin American relations, this study examines the development of contacts, especially diplomatic ties, between Hungary and the countries in Central America in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper is organised in a chronological way, and is divided into five chapters in order to underline dominant tendencies and shifts in the nature of relations. The analysis relies on documents of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, kept in the Hungarian National Archive. Due to the nature of the sources, the study offers readers a principally Hungarian perspective of the bilateral relations between Hungary and the Central American region.*